

A TOOLBOX FOR ADDRESSING SHAME IN DESIGN PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

In various master projects and workshops, we have experimented with a toolbox aimed at assisting designers with understanding self-conscious emotions such as shame, embarrassment, and guilt in relation to design challenges. The rationale for doing so is that using conventional methods of inquiry have severe limitations in understanding the role shame and related concepts have in supporting and hindering desirable sustainable, socially acceptable, and healthy s. This paper presents the toolbox which includes shame stretching exercises, inverse empathy mapping, a meme tool, a ‘Shame Cues’ card deck, and making fake news reports. We reflect on how students and workshop participants use these tools and how they contribute to their ability to better articulate shame related aspects, identify opportunities for design interventions based on removing or adding shame, and in general to raise norm critical awareness.

Keywords: Shame, self-conscious emotions, design tools, design methodology, norm-critical design

1 INTRODUCTION

Social phenomena which are taboo-prone and in which self-conscious emotions such as shame, guilt and embarrassment play a role, are of increasing interest for students [1]. Such topics not only share a high level of complexity which is strongly affected by norms, culture, and politics, but they also challenge students in their ability to deal with the more sensitive sides of society. Design education in general equips students with a toolbox that enable them to understand social phenomena, to raise good questions, map contexts by using interviews, surveys, focus groups, cultural probes, and use of other ethnographic methods. However, this toolbox becomes less straightforward to use when dealing with self-conscious emotions, addressing dark spots in society or having to ask awkward or embarrassing questions. In connection to an ongoing PhD project focusing on the role of shame in design [2], we have since 2021 successfully recruited master students who wrote their final master thesis on shame related topics. During this period, we have developed several tools dedicated to research these taboo-prone topics where shame, embarrassment, awkwardness, peer pressure, stigma, and other nuances of shame play an important role, and where traditional methods of inquiry would have shortcomings in uncovering such hidden and very personal user insights.

The aim of this paper is to present the toolbox in its current form, explain the tools’ purpose and provide examples of their use in projects and workshops. Based on this we reflect over their potential contribution to enabling designers to identify, articulate and address elements of shame and related concepts in design project. The tools are:

- a ‘shame-stretching’ tool, allowing for exploring boundaries in what is, for example, mainstream, odd, subculture, and illegal behaviour (Section 2)
- inverse empathy mapping, focusing on what people do *not* say, hear, feel, think, and do (Section 3)
- a meme tool, exploring alternative expressions of feelings and opinions which are not necessarily easily put in words (Section 4)
- an inspiration card deck tool named ‘Shame Cues’ showing how shame and related feelings manifest themselves in social concepts (Section 5)
- developing fake news reports in relation to proposed design interventions (Section 6)

The use of the toolbox is illustrated by sharing examples of its use in practical projects, including the aforementioned master projects as well two full week workshops and a two-day workshop with professionals (Table 1). The paper concludes with reflections by both students and supervisors on using these tools and how they complement the standard designers' toolbox.

Table 1. Overview of project and workshops in which we experimented with the toolbox

Context	Themes	Tools used
7 master projects (30 ECTS)	Safe personal sexual exploration for young male adults; "Sending nudes" culture in secondary and high schools; Rethinking gender roles in design education; Design in the context of economic shame; Rethinking (voluntary) childlessness and the nuclear family; Design for male mental and physical health and wellbeing; Exploring design interventions to improve the role of next-of-kin to those who have eating disorders	Free for students to choose; on average two tools used per project.
5 Master level specialisation projects (15 ECTS)	Partly the same students, and therefore partly overlapping with the above themes. In addition: Reducing denial of own alcohol abuse.	Free for students to choose: on average two tools used per project.
2 full week workshops (3 ECTS)	During the Xplore Design Week 2022 and 2023 at the University of Antwerp: Two times four groups of 3-4 students, focus on themes including body-shaming, excessive alcohol consumption among students, awkward situations related to cutlery use, shame related to doing activities as a single person, awkwardness related to situations in dressing rooms and more.	During first 2022 workshop all four groups used all tools except Fake News Report During the 2023 workshop the focus was on Shame Cues and Shame stretching, as well as Fake News Report
1 two-day workshop with professionals	A two-day qualitative 'pee-poo-period' workshop with eight professionals from design, architecture, and art, focusing on disposable products connected to urination, excretion and menstruation.	Focus on shame cues, meme tool, shame stretching

It should be noted that the tools are still prototypes and have in varying degrees undergone iterations in between the various student projects and workshops they have been tested in.

2 SHAME STRETCHING

This exercise was originally devised as having two parts. One is a canvas on which to lay out different examples (from memory, on-line sources or pictures taken from real life) related to a social phenomenon or practice, to challenge students to find shame-prone aspects related to that practice. The canvas (Figure 1) fades out from a large white area which is placed in the center, to a black rim on the edge of the canvas. At the center, examples reflecting 'normality' are placed, i.e., those which can be connected to, say, 80% of the population. Away from the center, darkening grey tones reflect examples which become gradually more uncommon; these are 'good for some' but 'not as good for others' and can be connected to the more adventurous (estimated ca. 1 out of 10 people) or to subcultures (1 out of 100). The black rim would then carry manifestations which include fetishes (perhaps 1 out of 1000 or 10000), and at the very edge extreme moralism or hedonism, representing manifestations that are rare, possibly taboo and/or illegal. For every manifestation, students are to collect many manifestations related to a social phenomenon or practice, which are then to be discussed: are they public, hidden, is there shame involved, and if yes, are they hidden to protect oneself, or others? In the context of clothing for example, one would play aspects such as *covering normal body parts*, *wearing mass produced brands* and *gendered clothing* at the centre. *Shopaholics* and *second-hand clothing* would come next, followed by subcultural aspects such as *cross-dressing*, *naturism*, *wearing white tennis socks under casual clothing*, before arriving at the black rim where *religious clothing traditions* and *clothing fetishism* would be placed. The second part of the shame stretching exercise is to challenge student to find various cues or signs of shame (including those extraverbal) and place them on a canvas, stretching between extremes

and exploring nuances of shame. These cues (or signs) of shame could be memes, Instagram posts, research articles, forum threads, Wikipedia articles, news headlines, advertisements, etc., that participants found important for their topic. Suggested examples of extremes are from affirmative to norm-critical, or from subtle to explicit. In the pee-poo-period workshop which is further reported on in Trondsen et al. [3], participants chose for example hidden-accessible, private-public, and clean-unclean to sort examples related to personal hygiene.

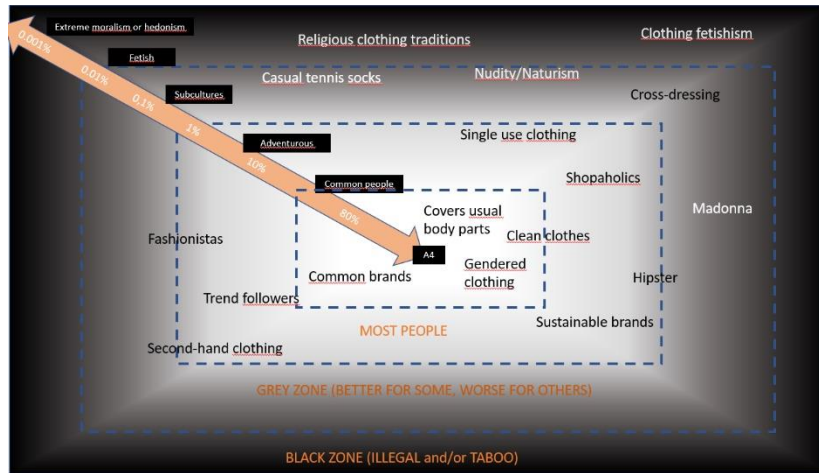


Figure 1. Shame stretching canvas

3 INVERSE EMPATHY MAPPING

Inverse empathy mapping is proposed as a variation on the well-known empathy mapping canvas, originally developed in 1993 by XPLANE founder David Gray as a collaborative tool for human-centred design which essentially challenges designers to uncover what people think, see, hear, say and feel. Instead, inverse empathy mapping is to challenge designers to uncover what people do not, or do not want to think, see, hear, say, and feel (Figure 2). The original empathy mapping tool was already noted by one of our students as one of the existing tools that was easiest for her to identify potentially shameful issues with because it addresses feelings and thoughts. In a workshop setting, she first used the original tool, and then used the inverse empathy map. This revealed that participants managed to identify potential shameful issues in the first round but were not able to articulate these clearly until they used the inversed version in the second round. But even then, they did not use the actual word ‘shame’ in their articulations before the student suggested it. Workshop participants also indicated that it was useful to use the original empathy map first, and that a two-step approach probably was better than only using the inverse empathy map, likely because it juxtaposes what people do and do not (want to).

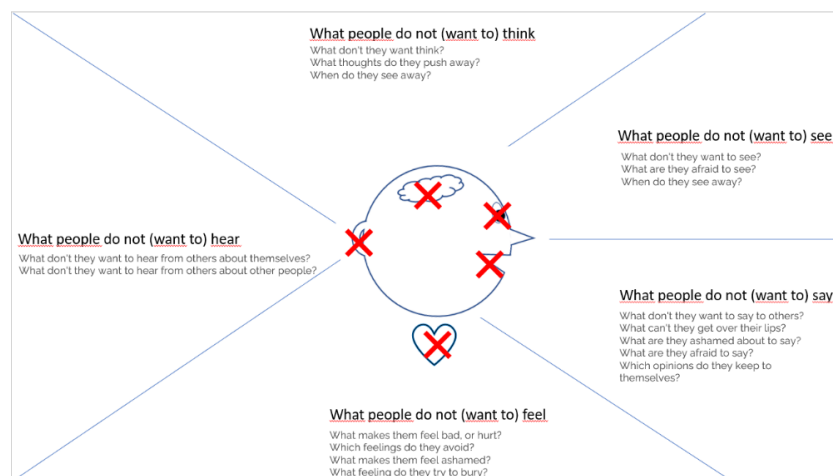


Figure 2. Inverse empathy mapping canvas

4 MEME TOOL

Internet memes are cultural expressions based on images which are augmented with text, where the image is chosen to convey a visual interpretation of the text's meaning. Memes are often taken from popular culture, and contain elements of humour, irony, and self-consciousness. Because meme images are often reused, they can grow to become popular conveyors of a certain core message, applied in similar contexts, and may gain viral dissemination. Zittrain [4] states that a meme at its best exposes a truth about something, and in its versatility allows that truth to be captured and applied in new situations. Especially for younger generations in this social media dominated era, internet memes can be considered as a popular mode of discourse, and a convenient way to anonymously articulate how feelings of shame, embarrassment and awkwardness play a role, and where conventional spoken or written language is insufficient to convey ideas, feelings and opinions. In the context of our design and shame projects, we have proposed our students to collect and study memes to capture the essence and nuance of certain complicated social phenomena. Mining user-generated content like memes appears ill-explored as a research method or design tool, although Engel et al. [5] already stated that they can be used by students to artfully show their comprehension of key concepts. Along that line of thought, we pose that memes, when mined from the internet and consequently studied, can provide a comprehension of a phenomenon which cannot be gained from studying the spoken and written word, and can therefore be seen as a means to gain insight as to what users think and feel, but will not communicate to researchers through conventional means of inquiry. We propose that students study memes by doing exactly what the meme intended to avoid: explicitly write out how the meme works and why. For example, suppose the 'Sceptical Third World Child' meme in Figure 3 would have been collected in the context of a food waste project. Students would then be expected to explain how it is used as a crude stereotype of Africa as war-torn, poor, and suffering constant food shortages, how it is used to juxtapose and ridicule supposedly irrational Western behaviours, and how it provides a mirror for western consumers with respect to their food waste behaviour, evoking shame about the fact that they try to solve a waste problem which shouldn't be there in the first place.

Two of our students wrote their master thesis about 'shame and men's health from a design perspective and used memes extensively to capture different aspects of the relationship of men with health. After gathering dozens of memes by searching the internet, they sorted them in eight categories, including 'Feelings of loneliness and lack of support', 'Helplessness and *man up*', 'Negative experiences related to opening up and showing vulnerability', 'Criticism on how society looks upon men's health' and 'Doubts related to going to the doctor or not'. One of the key insights in their mapping process was that there is a clear need to express feelings about shameful and awkward aspects related to men's health, and that many do this through memes, and that community feeling and expression through memes may create social awareness and acceptance. The students combined the collection of memes with shame stretching by sorting the memes along two axes (from memes which ridicule men and call out for shaming them, to memes which call out for sympathy and removal of shame) and found that memes could be placed at both ends of the axis.



Figure 3. Meme example

5 SHAME CUES

Shame Cues is a card deck designed to help designers understand, reflect upon, and play with social concepts where shame (and related concepts such as guilt, embarrassment, and awkwardness) plays a central role. It consists of 64 cards divided in 16 categories of social concepts which can be related to how shame manifests itself in society (Table 2). Much of how the concept is captured, verbalized, illustrated, and described on the cards stems from public discourse, and has been extracted from various non-academic and informal platforms such as Urban Dictionary, Wikipedia, Pinterest, memes, Imgur, Bored Panda, Reddit, Quora threads and so on. The Shame Cues tool has been used in different ways in the various projects and workshops. In its latest iteration, users of the tool are tasked with collecting examples of how a certain phenomenon (for example dumpster diving) can be connected to the cards and how; for example, *pussyfooting* may be connected as having a negative effect on dumpster diving, because people who may want to join a dumpster diving community may hesitate, thinking that they won't be accepted or considered external to this social group. Similarly, vicarious embarrassment may be relevant, considering that others may be embarrassed on your behalf and may therefore hinder people from dumpster diving. On the other hand, *snooping*, *morbid curiosity*, or *guilty pleasure* may have a positive effect as it can be tempting or satisfy curiosity to investigate others' (food) trash and bring associations with treasure hunting and getting something for free. A second part of the exercise is to pick random cards which in the first round had not been selected and see if examples can be found to illustrate the potential relevance of the card, to uncover blind spots and further increase the designer's understanding of how aspects of shame (added or removed) may play a role in contributing to the desired behaviour.

Table 2. Overview of categories and shame cues in the card deck

Exaggeration Sarcasm Camp Shamelessness Satire	Counter action Counterculture Reappropriation Subculture Civil disobedience	Humour Dad jokes Dark humour Schadenfreude Irony	Vulgarity Taboos Profanity Karen stereotype Vulgarism
Dark attraction Morbid curiosity Forbidden fruit Innuendo Neophilia	Pleasure Benign masochism Naughtiness Guilty pleasure Eccentricity	Secrecy Closeting Snooping Eavesdropping Sweeping under the rug	Softening Euphemism Metaphors Stylizing Awkward turtle
Covering Pardon my French Gedoogbeleid Sanitizing Sugar coating	Awkwardness Oversharing Personal space invasion Verbosity Awkwardness	Embarrassment Pussyfooting Cringe Vicarious embarrassment Overpraising	Slang Cheesiness Tackiness Corniness Geekiness
Guilt Confession Guilt tripping Guilt hibernation Sympathy card	Moralising Sanctimommy Political correctness Holier-than-thou Outrage culture	Humiliation Public humiliation Walk of shame Badge of shame Mockery	Separation Scapegoating Stigmatizing Cancel culture Shunning

6 FAKE NEWS REPORTS

In master projects we expect students to articulate the ideas behind the interventions they develop, by explaining how and why adding/removing shame will address challenges in a health, social or sustainability context. However, in workshops there is little time for explicitly documenting the ideas behind such interventions. Inspired by Hebrok & Mainsah [6] who used purposely designed fake news in their design fiction project BIRD, we found that asking students to articulate such ideas using fake news reports serves this goal of clarifying intentions behind their interventions surprisingly well. For students this proved to be an inspiring and fast way to articulate their ideas behind the concept, and during the final exhibition, many visitors reacted positively, stating that the fake news reports made it easy to understand the speculative and norm-critical designs displayed. A good example is the case of 'Crazy Cutlery', a restaurant concept which criticizes how society judge's people's eating habits, by offering random 'tools' like a small rake, a cheese grater, or a mussel shell, making it possible to eat inappropriately, and therefore a fun experience. Interestingly, in another project from the same workshop

we found that the chatbot ChatGPT was surprisingly well able to convey the main idea of the intended design intervention, once fed with a number of key phrases.

7 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

In this paper we briefly introduced a toolbox for assisting designers and design students to understand how shame and related concepts can play a role in many situations and potentially hinder or support desirable sustainable, healthy or social behaviours. The tools do not require direct user involvement, and instead rely heavily on how social phenomena are depicted in culture and everyday life. We recognize that so far, our experimentation with the tools has not been systematic, and no final conclusions can be drawn, but aimed to share our initial experiences in the limited space available. First, we have experienced that by using these tools, students become able to internalize an understanding of shame, and to elucidate the concept in relation to the behaviour they are studying, and to use it for inspiration. It challenges them to think out of the box, especially in terms of opportunities for norm-critical and discursive design interventions which otherwise remain in their blind zone. Additionally, students think the tools are fun to work with; in particular the relation to the online culture they are well familiar with seems to inspire them. They also state that they become more aware of how shame plays a role in many design challenges and that they are much better able to articulate this after using the tools. It is our experience however that bachelor students find it challenging to use the tools in a free form way and experience them as confusing even when clearly told how to use them step-by-step. For example, letting students determine themselves which axes may be relevant for shame stretching proves challenging. Using the shame cues proved to be very inspiring, but many students seem to dismiss cards as not immediately relevant, whilst as supervisors, being familiar with its intended use and having experience with making quick associations, we had no trouble making what seemed obvious links to us.

The meme tool may probably not function best as a separate tool but can be easily integrated in some of the other tools, not in the least because students love to work with memes. Using some of the tools (notably shame stretching and the Shame Cue cards) with professionals (in the pee-poo-period workshop [3]), we found that they sparked discussion concerning the meanings and definitions of shame, changing social norms surrounding shame, and the influence of these norms on individual feelings and behaviours. The tools helped the participants spin off each other's associations, and ideas, contributing to collective thinking. The participants' experimentation with different polarities on the shame-stretching canvas illustrates how these tools engaged them to open their minds and include new perspectives. Clearly, the more experienced and reflected designers become, the easier it is to reflect on the impact of social norms, both critically and analytically. Our overall insights suggest that a better vocabulary and awareness of shame can support designers in identifying how this emotion can hinder and promote sustainable practices, and how they can more effectively design with shame in mind, resulting in ideas that attempt to challenge and counteract societal norms and taboos. In our future work, we will further iterate on the tools, keeping the above considerations in mind, and in particular focus on helping users of the tools to interpret the results more effectively, by diversifying the toolkit based on the experience level of the intended audience. On a final note, we acknowledge that the use of such tools may risk uncovering hidden issues for students that may require emotional support. We have extensively addressed this issue in a previous E&PDE paper and will continue doing so.

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